

FOREWORD

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A. Lord Thorneycroft

Well, this was straight political pressure from the American Government. In its effects, perhaps making it more difficult for those who wanted to hold the American alliance on these sort of things - it would be harder to explain to British industry next time, that you were holding back because the Americans requested somebody does one of these things it erodes the possibilities a little further but you don't really get very angry. I mean these things happen so often.

Q. Were you ever prepared to support Franco's proposal for a tripartite in N.A.T.O.?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

I don't know about an actual tripartite. I know the British always had a good deal of sympathy with the French approach to N.A.T.O. If you could rub out some of the more exotic overtones of the French. I think their view was that you can't defend Europe without France. There is France right in the middle. People not being very ready to impart information, the American special relationship with Britain. These were all things calculated to infuriate any Frenchman as the reason for the particularly the general.

Q. Did you see Nassau as the reason for the Common Market veto?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

No. I think the General would have found a reason - he went up to the point when there were no reasons left and he still managed to say "No".

Q. CJBA. What was your first reaction to the Missile Crisis?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

For a few hours, it looked just possible that we might be teetering on a world war.

Q. Were you surprised at the British press reaction?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

I don't remember what it was.

Q. It was sceptical of Kennedy?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

No I don't think I was. The first thing everybody asks in any situation like that, "Are we absolutely sure they've got it right?"

Q. Do you think it was a mistake not to have produced the photos immediately they knew what the Russians were doing? Did you ever press the government for the release of the photographs?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

I don't think there was any need for the British government to press for any information. To the best of my knowledge it was given absolutely openly. All the time, every night. Not at every level, but between Prime Minister and President.

Q. Was anyone in the Government resentful of not being informed earlier?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

Well, what on earth could we have done anyway?

Q. Did you feel a sense of futility - that you were a by-stander?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

In common with the rest of the world, we were all bystanders. I mean what could one have done?

Q. What do you think Mr. Macmillan's role was?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

I think the only person that could be said to have a role was the Prime

Minister, really and I think he did have a role, of being close, a little separate from the hawks and doves who were surrounding the President, to whom the President could talk and the President did talk and he had a great respect for Mr. Macmillan. I don't say he would have necessarily taken his view but he felt he was a shrewd, experienced man - one can't say detached from the thing because none of us were detached from it - we were right in the thick of it - but in a way not committed to the particular view, of the hawks or the doves in America. The ability to talk to him was probably helpful. For the rest, I think the best role that the British could play, they did play - which was just not to fool around, not to demand summit conferences, or try and run the show themselves.

- Q. Was this ever taken seriously: the possibility of intervening and inviting a summit?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

It would have been dismissed completely, at once. It was difficult enough without somebody else intervening. The more people who come into that, the worse it gets.

- Q. Did you order any state of alert?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

To the best of my recollection is that one of these sort of modified un-publicised alerts was done; I don't think, to the best of my recollection, mind you this is some time ago, I don't think the bomber command were put under full alert and I think the whole object was to play this quietly and really the things that could be done were so limited and the alerts required in a field which was so alert anyway that we don't have to do a lot. It's not like calling up the reserves; what on earth for? There was no point in it so it wasn't one of those sort of things. I think we ordered one of these modified alerts. I remember sitting there with the Chiefs of Staff, that Sunday, discussing - wondering whether we have come to the end of the world and I think we decided to do most of this over the telephone with two or three people and we did it that way.

Q. President Kennedy didn't ask you at any time to be militarily prepared?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

I don't think so, not that I know of.

Q. Did you think there might be (in the first few days of the crisis) there might be some retaliation in Berlin - was this discussed?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

Well you can check this with others but I think that there was some escalation of readiness by N.A.T.O. I think on the Berlin side, but I'm not absolutely sure. You know there were various steps that you could take, and I think some of these were taken just in case that happened to exacerbate the situation but it was all played down at a pretty low level, because in fact everybody was incapable of doing anything about it.

Q. Would you agree with Mr. Macmillan and Sir Alan that this week was the most exhausting week of their political careers. Was it for you?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

No

Q. Why?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

It's obvious, because in a way, I mean, what is the good of being exhausted about things which you really can do nothing about. Exhaust yourself on things that you - something that you believe in, that you can do something about, then exhaust yourself by all means, but here the steps that I took as Minister of Defence were steps open to the Ministry, were limited and well-known. Those steps, such as they were, were taken in a very quiet way. One advised on any questions asked - all the advice was distally unhappy obviously because if they really started to mix it everybody was going to be in a terrible state. It's not a thing to be exhausted about.

Q. Did you ever think it would lead to nuclear war?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

I didn't really no. The thought crossed my mind that it might - I particularly remember that Sunday morning: Whitwell asserted, it was very quiet, rather a lovely morning, and just walking in there to the Ministry of Defence and thinking "My God I wonder whether this really is it", you know but not the real feeling that we were going to be devastated, but just the possibility did occur.

Q. Did you consult with the Prime Minister on that Sunday?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

Oh yes, yes.

Q. And you had a round of meetings with chiefs and so on?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

We had a round of meetings, but not conducted really in an atmosphere of frightful crisis because we weren't conducting this negotiation. Obviously I can see why Alec was in this because he was Foreign Secretary and he would be desperately (with the Foreign Office) looking at how a very difficult hand ought to be played even if he wasn't playing it himself. But we weren't - because it wasn't the job at the Ministry of Defence to do a negotiation, this was for President Kennedy to ask my advice that he might want from Macmillan or Home.

SKYBOLT

Q. I wonder if we may come on to Skybolt, to what extent had the writings been on the wall, for a year?

A. Lord Thorneycroft

There had been some uncertainty about Skybolt, as of all weapons I have never known a weapon which wasn't under constant attack partly on technical grounds and partly on the battle between the services - but I had gone out